

Lost and Found by myriophylous

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Summary:

Steve's not sure who to thank for this turn of events, but he's pretty sure that if Nancy and Jonathan had been on the train with him that morning, he never would have met Billy.

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Author's Note:

Something about these two just makes me want to write.

Thanks to the lovely @lymricks for the beta read/encouragement!

Steve, to this day, still maintains that he has only one person to thank for all of this, and that person is a particularly high maintenance actor who insisted that his photoshoot for GQ be hastily rescheduled for a particular weekend in early April, production schedules be damned.

Jonathan, newly employed by the magazine to shoot editorial photographs, had been forced to stay in New York, and of course Nancy, who was writing the profile, had been stuck there as well. So Steve found himself entirely alone that morning, boarding the train up to Boston for the weekend to go see the kids who, seven years out from high school, he still affectionately referred to as ‘the shitheads’.

Steve still has the best photo from the shoot in a frame, somewhat prominently displayed, and while he has only a passing interest in this particular movie star, he’s pretty sure that if Nancy and Jonathan had been on the train with him, he never would have met Billy.

...

So, that same April morning, after receiving a flurry of texts full of profuse apologies from Nancy, Steve found himself alone on the platform at Penn Station as the train pulled up. While Steve did occasionally travel up to Boston alone to see Dustin and the kids, he preferred when Nancy and Jonathan joined him, and they got to spend the weekend all together, briefly reuniting their little Hawkins family. It had been long enough since high school, and he had been through enough one-night stands and short flings in the past, that seeing Nancy and Jonathan together no longer stung. He was just happy to have them in his life. They had been his only constant since

moving to New York, basically following them to the city when they were accepted by NYU and Barnard and Steve wanted nothing more than to escape the overbearing thumb of his father's real estate business in Hawkins.

It turned out that he had ended up a realtor anyway, but now he got to plan his own days, pick his own hours, and he still got a spark of joy when he managed to find just the right home for his clients. There was nothing more satisfying than walking through a quiet, empty brownstone, so empty like the house he grew up in, and imagining a family filling it with memories, the parents filling the house with their presence in a way his never had.

Steve threw his bag over his shoulder and stepped onto the train, as the conductor, with tell-tale accent, shouted out "BOSTON!" It was convenient for visits that the kids had all ended up in the same city for college, although Steve knew that there had been a good deal of planning and more than a few nights of over-the-phone hair pulling from Dustin during the wait for acceptances.

Lucas had ended up at Harvard, which hadn't surprised Steve in the slightest. Mike was working on a series of science-fiction novels while mostly attending classes at Boston College, and living in a basement apartment with El, who was working nights as a pastry chef, creating delicate tarts and sugared stroopwafels in the quiet hours of the morning. Sometimes, when Steve came up alone on an early train, which got in as she was leaving work on a Saturday morning, she would meet him at the station with a carefully wrapped chocolate croissant and a steaming coffee, before she headed home to sleep away the morning. At first, Steve thought it seemed like such a lonely job, spending all night awake and alone with your thoughts, but after growing up in a group home before Hopper adopted her, he imagined she liked the solitude of her own company.

Dustin was doing god-knows-what at MIT, and while Steve often had trouble grasping the details of whatever project he was currently working on, he could listen to the kid yammer for hours, happy to give him a brotherly outlet for his excitement. Will was technically outside of Boston, having nabbed a scholarship to RISD, but he took the train up most weekends and crashed in his friend's dorms on an ever-rotating schedule. Although, according to Dustin, since meeting

his current boyfriend (who seemed to be a relatively talented metal sculptor, if the art show Steve was only somewhat unwillingly dragged to the month previous had been any indication) Will's visits to the city had become slightly less frequent.

Steve thought about that art show again as he walked up the aisle of the nearly-full train looking for an empty seat, eyes scanning for an opening before landing on the intricately tattooed arm of a man sitting by himself in one of those four-seat sections at the end of the car. The tattoo reminded him instantly of the most memorable piece he had seen at the show, a painstakingly detailed mass of black paper cutouts against a stark white backdrop, fanning out in all directions, coming together and pulling apart at the edges of the wall. The design ran up this man's arms and under the sleeves of his shirt, all in black linework, and it was somehow both an abstract galaxy of stars and planets, and a tropical rainforest lush with leaves.

The train gave a lurch as it departed from the station, and not seeing any other options Steve scurried forward, dropping into the open seat directly across from the object of his momentary fascination.

The guy, who was listening to music with his eyes in a book, gave Steve a quick, nervous look, and then turned his eyes back to the book in his hands. He looked like he was wound a bit too tightly, like a normally loose rope pulled taut and growing brittle.

Steve threw down his duffel and briefcase, and began the process of extracting his laptop to try and get some work done, but found that instead of concentrating remotely on the task at hand, his eyes kept drifting back up to the occupant of the seat across from him.

Frankly, who could blame him? In addition to the tattoos up both arms, which Steve was always a sucker for on both guys and girls, he had seemingly long, wavy blonde hair pulled into a messy bun, and thick, dark lashes which blinked frequently as his eyes scanned across the pages of his book. His ears peaked out from behind his curls with just a touch more prominence than normal, which was all sorts of adorable. His free hand picked nervously at a frayed tear in the knee of his fitted jeans, and Steve could see the sharp, curling edges of more blackwork tattoos through the fabric of the clean, white t-shirt he wore. A leather jacket and a well-worn hunter green camping bag

were tucked up under his arm, with a small sleeping roll in a waterproof cover lashed to the front of it.

Steve stole glance after glance as they headed up into Connecticut, trying to do his best to be subtle, but the stranger was fully in the thrall of the book he was paging through, which Steve noted was called “The Things They Carried.” He had never heard of it.

Steve busied himself with emails and tried to keep his eyes on the screen, until about a half hour later when the train whistle sounded and he whipped his head up sharply. The train stopped short, jostling Steve and his bag and nearly making him hit send on what he was pretty sure was an overtly passive aggressive email that he was planning on mostly deleting.

The train’s loudspeaker crackled to life. “Attention all passengers. There is a train stalled on the track ahead of us. We will remain here until further information is available. Please remain calm. Updates to follow.”

Almost immediately, the train broke out in a chorus of load groans, and Steve looked up to find that the guy across from him was now gazing directly at him, piercing blue eyes meeting his as he gently tugged the headphones out of his ears. His gaze was panicked and slightly confused for just a second, and then seemed to soften as he focused on Steve’s face.

“Hey, man,” he said to Steve, with an edge of an impish grin “Did you catch that announcement? I had my music on and we’ve clearly stopped, and judging by the sudden uproar I’m assuming it’s more along the lines of ‘Sorry, Amtrak is now bankrupt and you’re all walking to Boston’ and less ‘Surprise, free mimosas in the dining car.’”

“Ugh, if only...” Steve sighed, “uh, apparently a train stalled? On the track ahead? Could be a few hours, maybe, if it’s anything like the last time this happened.”

“Fuckin, hell, shit!” the guy barked, running his fingers through the loose curls spilling out along his hairline. He grabbed his backpack, shoved his book inside, and pulled out his cell phone. Steve watched

the black galaxies shift and move with the muscles under his arms. He dialed quickly and tapped his foot until the person on the other line picked up. Steve could now notice, as the bag spilled open, the name 'Billy' stitched on the inside flap of the backpack.

"Hey, Max? Yeah, I'm on the train....yes, I'm really on it....yeah, so it looks like there's some issue, train stalled up ahead...yeah, could you come into the city and pick up the rental car? I know I was going to pick it up and get the tent and come out to campus, but if you meet me and we head out as soon as I get in we can make it to the campsite by nightfall....yeah, I'll text you the confirmation info...yeah, I love you too, shitbird. I'll let you know when we're moving again...bye for now."

Hanging up, his posture relaxed instantly, and he turned back towards Steve, who was mostly just trying to act like he had not been eavesdropping, and pretty much utterly failing at it. Billy, if the name on his bag was any indication, did not seem to mind in the slightest, and did not reach for his book or replace his earbuds, but rather fixed Steve with a somewhat flirtatious gaze, languidly pulling his hair out of its bun and retying it while running his eyes down Steve's frame.

"Thanks, man, sorry for the outburst - I'm supposed to be meeting my step-sister Max at her college and driving out to camp for the weekend - I don't exactly have the best track record when it comes to showing up, and she's a hellion on the best of days, but I'm working on it, I just hope she doesn't hold this one against me." Billy looked a bit sheepish, and Steve was somewhat surprised to be getting such a candid statement off the cuff from a random stranger on a train. But he liked where it was going.

"I'm sure she'll understand." Steve replied. "What college is she at? I'm actually heading up there to see my - well not exactly my younger brother? But a kid I basically got close with back in high school - him and his group of knuckleheads wormed their way into my life via my ex-girlfriend, who I'm still close with, and they stuck like barnacles. But, yeah - Dustin, he's smart as hell, he's at MIT, and the rest are scattered around the city." Steve smiled, but was alarmed at how much he was rambling - this guy was disarmingly attractive.

"She's actually at Wellesley - so right outside the city." Billy replied.

"I was honestly surprised when I heard - she had always been friends with mostly guys, I didn't see her going to a women's college. But the financial aid package was too good to turn down -we didn't exactly grow up with a lot to spare. But now - I think she honestly loves it, she's got a bunch of friends and she's smart as hell too. She's gonna kick ass out there when she graduates next year, put me to shame."

Billy smiled affectionately, and Steve could see that he thought the world of his younger sister. "Camping's not so much my thing, but at least it's been a really warm spring, and she was going on about the chance to stargaze, and something about soil samples, so here we are."

"Stargazing and soil samples?" Steve laughed. "Damn, it seems like she would get along great with my little family of nerds. I'm always trying to help Dustin meet girls at school, but he doesn't exactly have the best track record. If you're ever looking to add matchmaker to your profile in addition to big brother, let me know and I can make it happen."

"Oh really?" Billy smiled broadly, dimple winking in the corner of his face. He pinned Steve with his eyes and twirled his finger around a curl near his sharp jawline. "So if I set up my step-sister with your sort of brother, would that make us related? Because I think it's going to be a problem for me if my apparent new brother is fucking hot as hell. Though, if your not-as-subtle-as-you-thought glances at me for the past hour are any indication, I think we might be dealing with the same issue here..."

Steve's jaw dropped just the slightest bit, and he could feel his face turning crimson. Billy laughed softly, and gave him an exaggerated wink that cut the tension pretty well. Steve laughed too, and ducked his face down - while he could effortlessly flirt with women, had been doing it with ease since high school, men still tended to throw him off balance a bit. Living in New York had helped with that a bit in recent years - he had not exactly been out as bisexual in Hawkins, Indiana, but since moving to the city and dragging Nancy to some gay clubs he was starting to feel better in his skin.

Steve brought his face back up when he felt one of Billy's feet gently nudge his. He looked up into Billy's warm, open face, and smiled

again.

“So, new brother, I’m Billy, can I get your name?”

They talked for hours as the train finally roared to life and started chugging towards Boston once more, Steve pulling Billy back layer by layer with each new fact. It was almost funny how Billy seemed to vacillate between two extremes of personality as they traded anecdotes about the kids, about hilarious subway encounters, and how lonely New York could be sometimes - one second his posture was all flirt, playful and eyes winking, and then he would slip suddenly into a softer, more open position, and let out hint of something more real.

Steve could sense that Billy he had spent a number of years building up an outward persona that faced the world all eyebrows cocked and guns blazing, and he was only recently learning to let the facade drop in the slightest. It was endearing as hell.

“Wait, so they all did what!?”

“Oh god,” Steve laughed, remembering the utter carnage of the night a few months ago when the kids had attempted to throw him a surprise birthday party when he was up visiting. “I felt bad, but I could not stop laughing it was so funny. I have no idea where they got all that silly string, or why for some reason they thought it was an acceptable form of décor, as opposed to like, streamers, or something, but they sprayed it everywhere! It really was sweet, they were just trying to give me a nice surprise, or some shit, but then we basically just spent the entire night scrubbing the walls of Dustin’s dorm room while eating cake.”

“Oh man,” Billy was laughing too, casually leaning on the window of the train, curls pressed against the glass with sunlight filtering through. “You want to hear about cake disasters? It was my birthday last month, and I went up to see Max at school, and she’s not much of a baker but she and her roommate somehow located a kitchen on

campus and baked me a cake – which – like you said, was so fucking sweet of her, but damn, that thing was nasty – I’m such a sucker, though, I ate three pieces.”

Billy smiled, eyes crinkling at the corners, and Steve’s heart was fucking swelling and he was fucking toast, really, he was.

Steve learned that Billy was originally from California (hence the surfer hair) and was currently working as a tattoo artist (which was not terribly surprising given the amount of ink Steve could see on him even while mostly clothed) but that Billy was more interested long-term in becoming a writer. He learned that Billy had a wicked sense of humor, and he was found of using his mouth in other ways, too, he was constantly licking his lips, or wagging his tongue just a little bit when he said something particularly flirtatious. Billy even flashed him the scar on the inside of his lip from where it used to be pierced with a ring - which Steve privately thought would have been a good look on him, but Billy said he had wanted to remove it now that he was trying to meet with agents about getting something published.

Steve talked about how much he loved his work - how he had spent years hating his father’s business, but that now he was grateful it had led him to be doing something that he was actually good at, since academics had never been his strong point. Steve saw Billy tense up and look away when Steve talked about how he wanted to make sure every one of his clients had a home where they could make great memories, since he had really grown up without that.

“Nancy, Jonathan and the kids are really pretty much my family now - I barely see my parents at all. There are times I feel so twisted up about that, because, like, I know they love me in their own way?” Steve phrased this as a question, because it was true, that all these years later he was still a little unsure about it. It felt ok to say out loud though, and it felt a bit like showing his soft underbelly, baring a bit of soul, but Billy’s hands looked so capable and soft that he thought they might just hold it carefully.

“My house is covered with pictures of me, but it always felt like more of a gallery of their greatest hits of parenting than a statement of any

actual affection. They were always more concerned with appearances, my dad most of all – he could be ‘working late every night this week’ when we all knew full well he was off fucking his secretary, but heaven forbid they tarnish their reputation with divorce. So lo and behold, there was my mother out with him the next night, laughing on his arm like it was all normal.” Steve said.

“I think that’s maybe why I was honestly such a dick for most of high school – I think I was so insecure about keeping up that same appearance, going from girl to girl so they’d fight over me and I could feel a little better about myself, feel wanted, so I could walk around like I owned the damn place. Which I pretty much did, for a few years.” Billy turned his face back from the window at that phrase, and broke into a wide grin.

“Really? Wow, am I in the presence of a bad boy, womanizing, prom king over here?” Billy leaned up out of his seat, pushing himself just a little bit forward into Steve’s space, grinning like a cat about to pounce. His tone was warm, familiar, with just a hint of a teasing laugh.

“Steve, Steve, I meet you here on this train with your puppy dog eyes and that little bashful smile, and you lure me in with story after story of being a doting babysitter to the nerd population of central Indiana, and now I find out you were actually just busy getting bj’s under the bleachers and cutting class? Shame, shame!” Billy was openly laughing now, but it was pure sweetness – it seemed to Steve like he was actually pretty glad to see this side of him.

“To be honest, I’m glad – I was worried I might be corrupting a golden boy here. I have to ask though, what changed? You wake up one morning, hang up your crown, and decide to take up Dungeons & Dragons?” Billy canted his head to the side, needling just a little bit, clearly curious to see what made Steve tick.

Steve paused, enjoying the way Billy was drinking him in, and enjoying how he wanted, for the first time in a while, to let someone in, to throw his cards down on the table and watch them picked up by warm, deft fingers.

“Well, Steve said. “It’s a bit of a long story, but it all really started

with falling in love with Nancy, then out of love with Nancy..."

It was losing Nancy that changed him, Steve thinks. She had been the first person he had ever really wanted, wanted to keep rather than use to fuel his own self-worth – and in losing that he realized that he could have so much more from his life, so much more than moving with her into the house next door to his parents and working for his father until he became the same sad, wrung out shell of a person.

"Really, though," Steve went on, "It all kind of came to a head one day when I was bringing her flowers after a fight. I think I already knew at that point that she was done with me, I knew she was in love with Jonathan, but I think the thought of being so fucking lonely without her made me crawl back to her door with a dozen roses. But the thing is – I never made it to the door."

"Dustin – for some reason he was there too, outside her house, looking for Mike? I never quite figured out why, but apparently no one was answering their phones, and he was fighting with Lucas, and a whole bunch of other middle school drama – and fuck, I just looked at this lonely kid, sitting on the driveway next to this bike in front of Nancy's house, and when I walked over to him he told me that no one was home – and I just kind of wilted down next to him." Steve mimed the action a little as he spoke, wilting down into the seat. He was a little embarrassed at how pathetic it seemed, but Billy was beaming back at him as he spoke.

"I was in a pretty low place, man, I had basically told all of my former friends to fuck off after I saw how they treated Nancy, and I needed someone to talk to, even if it was her snot-nosed brother's strange friend. So we sat there, two lonely hearts on a driveway in the burbs, and we just shot the shit till it started to get dark. He was actually pretty hilarious. We got hungry, I took him to the diner for burgers and shakes, I brought him home and met his mom, who was just so sweet and warm and like the total opposite of my mother, and, kinda, the rest is history?" Steve laughed a bit to himself–sometimes it was funny how it had all sort of come together.

"So, I kind of adopted a pack of middle schoolers on a trial basis, and I got over Nancy, and her and Jonathan became basically my best friends, at least for a year. But then they graduated, and moved to go

to NYU, together, and there was me – stuck in Hawkins with only the kids and a job that was making me miserable. They got me thought that next year, and I’m grateful for that, and Dustin honestly gave me the kick in the pants to get out of Hawkins and move to New York, as much as he bitched about it after I was gone.” Dustin had indeed bitched, in fact he had cried when Steve left for the airport, but after a few months was glad to see him thriving.

“So, yeah, that’s been my past few years – I haven’t been back to Hawkins since, just the occasional visit from my parents when they swing through the city. Can’t say I miss Indiana. You, though,” Steve gestured at Billy, “I imagine you can’t say the same, when you compare Hawkins to Southern California! Do you and your step-sister go home often?” As Steve asked this, Billy was suddenly silent, and he turned his face back towards the window, foot frantically tapping out patterns on the carpeted train floor. He jaw was set tight, and he swallowed roughly but said nothing.

Sensing he had touched on a nerve, Steve waited a beat, and tried to shift the conversation topic. “So,” he asked, “I started spewing my life story ‘cause we were talking about work, right? Speaking of things we love about our jobs - tell me about the tattoos - they, they are really something. The patterns remind me of so many things all at once.”

“Ha, funny you should ask.” Billy huffed, posture still stuff and closed off. “I normally brush off that question with a bullshit response, but...I can give you the full story, maybe.”

Billy had his head turned towards the window, eyes scanning the trees that flew by, and he started to speak, at first haltingly, and then with a bit more confidence. He seemed to be trying to figure out where to start talking - he stopped and started a few times before he finally formed a full sentence.

“The tattoos are sort of a long term project. I got my first one when I was 19.” Billy sighed, and scrunched up his face, his body still pulled taught.

“I was a piece of shit for a long time. My father was long-time military, and he was in Vietnam, and I’m not sure what sort of person

he was before it, but when he came back he was basically an angry, violent drunk.” Billy spit out the last phrase, and pulled one of his legs up close to his chest, fingers playing with the laces on his black leather boot.

“Most of my memories of him as a kid are of my mother protecting me from the worst of it, but when she died, I was the only person he had left in his life to beat up on. Not that it was honestly physical a lot of the time, the physical part was almost easier. And, and I took it, I fucking took it for so many years and I forced myself to become almost as bad as he was to protect myself from the terror of the alternative, of letting him see how he tore me up. I don’t know that he ever figured out that I was gay, but I always felt like that wasn’t even a part of it, anyway, when you got to the root of it. It only got worse when he married my stepmom, and she brought Max with her, because after a year of him trying to make us play happy family, I was so fucked up from the rage of it all that I could finally see that I was treating Max like he treated me, and...” his voice sputtered out a bit, and he finally pulled his eyes away from the window, and Steve could see how blue they were, again, and how hard Billy was working to keep them from spilling over.

“So I left. I left before I turned 18, I thought Max would be better off without me, and that she had her mom to protect her from him, and I just....kinda let myself get lost. I took my mom’s old Camaro and headed south towards LA. I bartended, I worked on cars, I painted graffiti, and I fucked around with a bunch of people. But I mostly just kept being an angry, fucked up kid who started fights at the drop of a hat with anyone who got in my way, and who drank too much too often. After a few years of alienating most of the people I had left, I got way too drunk one night and passed out in front of a tattoo parlor.”

Steve unconsciously raised his eyebrow at this, and Billy laughed softly at the implication. “No, no, I didn’t get wasted and decide to let some dude go to town on my arms and chest. The place was closed for the night, but I was still there in the morning passed out on the front stoop when I was greeted by a bucket of water to the face from the owner. She was, I mean she is, she’s still there running it, a fucking fantastic stubborn woman, and a crazy talented artist as well.

She ran the place with her wife, and somehow they decided that the best thing to do was take this friendless, grungy, soaking wet 19 year old and make him into some sort of better human. I'm not sure what she saw in me - maybe she saw the designs I had drawn all over my jeans and saw potential in me as an artist, or maybe she saw a fellow scared as shit queer who was trying to be cocky and full of swagger but was actually without a place in the world, but she took me out for breakfast and forced most of the details of my life out of me."

Billy's hands moved back down to his boot, which was still resting on the seat, and he slowly began unlacing it as he spoke. Steve noticed how steadily his hands moved, how the tendons shifted under his skin as his deft fingers slowly pulled open the laces. Steve's fingers itched with the urge to reach out and grab Billy's hands, to press into his palm in warm, firm strokes, but he resisted, sensing that Billy might snap closed like a trap at the lightest touch.

Billy swallowed, and kept talking. "After I was done spilling my life's story, she looked at me, stuck her foot out from under the booth, and pulled off her shoe. She had a beautiful tattoo there, on the side of her foot - a small elephant, with a rope tied to its leg that was drawn around the edge of her ankle. The style of the tattoo was beautiful, it was all in twisted, turning black lines - I loved it. Then she told me why she had it tattooed there." Billy paused, looking straight at Steve.

"Have you ever heard about how they used to train circus elephants?" Billy asked. Steve shook his head, and wondered where the story was going.

"They used to start training them to submit as soon as they were born - they would keep them tied up with a rope tethered to a pole. When they were little, no matter how much they fought, the rope was too strong, the pole was dug in too deep, and they were too young and weak to overpower it. So that feeling of powerlessness, of giving up, of submitting - that became ingrained in their minds. It would get to the point that even years later, when they had fully grown up, their trainers could keep them tethered to one place with the same small rope and pole - because in their minds, they were still powerless. She told me that even though I had left his house, even though I had grown to the point where I could easily walk away physically from

all of the shit he made me think about myself - I was still like the elephant, convincing myself that I was tethered to the person he had made me. I was still tied to him like a pole.”

Billy pulled off his boot as he finished the story, and Steve saw the tattoo he was talking about - Billy clearly had the same one, a blackwork baby elephant, rope twining up across his ankle. He smiled up at Steve, dimples just barely showing in his cheeks, and slipped his shoe back on.

“So yeah, this was the first tattoo I let her give me, after a few months of her letting me apprentice under her and crash on her couch. We designed all these other ones together, and added to them over the years - it’s a fusion of her styles and mine - the lines, the galaxies, the leaves. They hurt like hell, but it was a mostly, like, a cleansing sort of pain, something I needed to help me move on. After a few years of working with her I had my shit together, for the most part. But the rope is still a part of me, that chapter of my life is still there, and it’s so fucking hard sometimes to remember that I don’t have to be that person anymore. But I’m working on it.” Billy locked eyes with Steve again, and the lines of his body straightened out, his posture more confident, more assured.

“I saved up enough money, and she got me a job at a shop in New York - I need a change of scene, and I knew Max was here on the East Coast, at school up in Boston - my biggest regret was how I had treated her before I left, and the fact that I had left her at all, too. I got a hold of her, wrote her a letter, and after a few months we re-connected. That’s why I was so nervous before - we’ve seen each other a few times since then, but this is the first time we’ve planned anything big together, and I’m trying so hard not to fuck it up.” He breathed out this last phrase, looked up at Steve, and barked out a sarcastic laugh. “Not exactly the story you were expecting, eh? I’m not normally big on sharing, but I think that every time I talk about it I’m able to put it a little more in the past.”

“I mean, no, not exactly?” Steve sputtered, feeling a bit off-kilter after Billy had just opened himself up so completely. His eyes widened a bit, and he tried to fix Billy with a bright smile. He leaned forward a bit into Billy’s space, wanting to reach out and touch him, but resisting the urge for the moment. “But, I mean, wow? That’s a lot,

Billy, but you should be proud of moving past it and trying to be there for your sister, and for yourself. And also, that you are insanely talented, if you designed all of these,” gesturing to Billy’s arms. “And also, I love the elephant, and the story behind it - your mentor, I’m sure she’s glad you picked her door to wash up on that night.”

“Yeah,” Billy replied. “I’m pretty sure most days she feels that way too.”

Just as Steve was about to reply, the train whistle sounded as they pulled into a station.

“Boston, Back Bay!” The conductor shouted as he walked down the aisle.

Billy started shoving items into his bag, and turned to Steve - “Shit, sorry, I didn’t realize we were so close to the station - I normally get off at South, but Max is picking up a tent from her friend who lives in Back Bay so she’s meeting me here with the rental car. You?”

“No,” Steve replied - “I’m getting off at South, we have a long-standing tradition of meeting up for breakfast pastries in the North End, can’t miss it.”

“Ok, cool,” Billy replied. “So, here, take this then -” He grabbed the book he had been reading, pulled a pen from his jeans pocket, and scribbled something on the inside cover before handing it to Steve. “Take this, I’ve got another copy, and you should read it too - and you can give me a call sometime when you’re back in New York?” Billy looked like he was mostly trying to project an air of confidence, but there was an edge of uncertainty that made it play as mostly adorable. Steve was hooked.

Steve took the book right away, and their fingers brushed slightly as he grasped the worn paperback cover. “Oh, I absolutely will.” he winked back at Billy. “Have a great time camping with Max.”

Billy gave him one more smile, shouldered his bag, and walked off the train.

Before Steve could even open the book to put the number into his

phone, it started ringing -

"Steve?! Are you here yet? I'm in line at Modern, I don't care WHAT Mike says, it's better than Mike's, just cause it's got his same name it's like he's got some sort of brand loyalty, it's insanity, oh, and did I tell you about what Lucas and I did last night? Wait till you hear about it..."

Steve listed patiently as Dustin went on about some building on Harvard's campus they had been trying to infiltrate, and how the plan had somehow involved both a flock of ducks and multiple fireworks, and he was laughing so hard that he almost missed getting off at his station, gathering up all of his things at the last second and throwing himself off the train.

It was only later that night, as he was unpacking all of his bags, that he realized the book with Billy's number in it was nowhere to be found.

.....

"Steve, it's been over a month, you gotta stop moping around." Dustin groaned, flicking the edges of his blanket as he laid on his dorm room bed, Steve on speakerphone resting on his chest as they talked. "You meet this guy, you literally spent the entire weekend flipping out about him and his hair and his ass in tight jeans, disgusting, and about how he like, bared his soul to you or something, and now you're just beating yourself up about your failure to locate him!"

"Dustin.....ughhhh....I'm just so frustrated. I called Amtrak lost and found, I looked on Facebook, I don't even know his last name! Do you know how many guys with the first name William there are in New York City? I can't just start stalking every tattoo parlor in five boroughs or something, like a crazy person. Frankly, I tried with one and I nearly let a terrifying bearded man talk me into a nipple ring. Or like, what, come up to visit and recruit you all to hang out on Wellesley campus like some sort of stalkers, looking frantically for

some girl named Max...”

“Steve!” Dustin shouted, sitting up on the bed. “I maintain that the plan would have worked. I talked it over with Lucas and we felt like given the rate of –“

“No!” Steve cut him off. “Look, I’m sorry, I’m late to meet with these new clients and I gotta go. You’re right, I need to get over it. Even if he was gorgeous and charming and literally had a – Nope, nope I’m not doing this to myself again. Call me later? We all need to conference with Nancy and Jonathan about when you guys are coming down next week before you all start your various nerdy summer pursuits. Talk later?”

“Yeah,” Dustin sighed. “Talk later.” Dustin punched the end call button. He threw his phone down, paced around his dorm room for a minute, and then picked it back up, smashing the home button and calling Lucas.

“Buddy, are you free tomorrow night? I’m calling the others – drinks after classes at Charlie’s? Yeah, in the beer garden. Look, Steve is torturing me here, he’s so depressed and I can’t act like I’m clueless, and if I have to hear anything else about Max’s brother’s ‘eyes, Dustin, they were so blue’ I’m going to drown myself. We have to figure out the actual plan so we can tell him!! Yeesh, yeah, see you in a few.”

Dustin hung up, mass texted the group to confirm, and then turned to look in the mirror, fixing his curls under his hat. Steve was useless sometimes, but he loved him, and he was honestly pretty excited that he might manage to pull this off. “Well well well, how the tables have turned” he muttered to himself. “Dustin Henderson, master matchmaker, to the rescue.”

After hanging up on Dustin, Steve rounded the corner to grab a bagel and some coffee before heading to meet that morning’s clients. He tried to distract himself with a mindless phone game as he waited in line, but it had been harder lately. He had just lied to Dustin – not only was he decidedly not getting over it, he had in fact been to

almost 20 tattoo parlors, getting his hopes up every time only to have them dashed.

At first, after spending that entire Boston weekend trying his best to let the kids and their antics distract him, he had thought that it would be fine, that he would be able to quickly move on from this missed connection with Billy. He got back to New York, vowed to get back on Tinder, and threw himself back into work. But after three somewhat disastrous first dates (two stunning girls and an unremarkable guy, all of whom failed to remotely excite him), two very drunken gay bar visits where Nancy had to pour him into an Uber at the end of the night, and an uncomfortable number of dreams about Billy, Steve was starting to admit to himself that he was absolutely not moving on.

He couldn't shake the memory of meeting Billy from his mind, the way he had dropped his guard and let Steve in, the way Steve had wanted for the first time in a long while. He felt like there had been the beginnings of a bond woven between them before it was so abruptly severed, and now Steve was searching for the threads, trying to follow one back to Billy.

He sighed, pocketed his phone, and stepped up to the counter to order. But all he could think about was that after his meeting, he had another tattoo shop to visit.

Later that night, another shop visit having failed somewhat spectacularly, Steve walked up the stairs to his apartment with his shoulders slumped, feet weighing him down like lead. Normally he loved coming home at the end of the day; one of the perks of working as a realtor was the pretty nice place he had managed to snag, and the décor he had accumulated from staging properties, and it felt more like home, more personal, than anywhere else he had ever lived. But since meeting and subsequently losing Billy in the span of 6 hours, it felt like the occasional loneliness he previously felt coming home to an empty house had been thrown under a spotlight.

The fridge, stocked with a few items he loved? Depressingly empty. His big couch, with lots of pillows he loved to squish down into after a long day? Practically barren in the absence of equally comforting arms to fall into. The bathroom sinks, two of them, a luxury rarely

seen in one-bedroom apartments? He had pushed some of his hair products toward the unused one so it stopped mocking him every morning.

While he understood theoretically that he was being more than a little melodramatic, and that he was not even thirty, and had a lot of really good things in his life even without a long-term relationship, when he sat down to eat dinner alone for the fourth time that week, it didn't really feel that way.

"Hi, Lucas? Yes, I know I called the meeting, but my professor this afternoon was riding my ass, he's completely unreasonable, I had to stay late and debate the merits of the paper I submitted before he would acquiesce to my very reasonable demands...ok I'm outside, see you in a sec."

The day after he had talked with Steve, Dustin flashed his ID, walked into the bar, and headed out back to the open-air beer garden to meet the party. He easily threaded his way through the bar to the back - this had become somewhat of a regular hangout since they had all turned 21, since the large wooden tables in the back were perfect for laying out schoolwork or playing board games, of which the bar had a full stock. Dustin had not taken to the beer drinking aspect of the whole thing as quickly as Mike or Lucas, but generally he and El enjoyed whatever hard cider was on tap.

He spotted the group at the back of the garden, and waved enthusiastically. He saw Mike grab his phone to call Will. In addition to being in Providence during the week, Will was the last to turn 21, so he was conferenced in on Facetime for any crucial party business during the week. El was drawing something in her notebook while looking over the menu, and Lucas was talking animatedly to the tall redhead seated next to him – Max.

Max. That was pretty much the only personal detail Steve had known about Billy's younger sister, who went to Wellesley - that her name was Max. While Steve had spent the weekend in a quiet panic about never finding Billy again, Dustin was working on a plan, a plan he ultimately never even had to enact. It had all gone down flawlessly -

well - almost flawlessly, his one problem had been enlisting Lucas as his right-hand man.

It all started at the retro bar and arcade near MIT's campus, where the party met up regularly to hone their skills at 80's era arcade games. El was wicked good at PacMan, Lucas was top at Galaga, and Mike and Will regularly battled each other for top spot on Star Wars - but Dustin was particularly fond of a lesser known game towards the back of the arcade called Dig Dug. He was pretty sure he was one of the only people at the bar who ever played it.

A few weeks ago, having recruited Lucas to hang out with him and help him with Steve's situation, he was surprised to walk into the bar and find Dig Dug occupied by a very determined looking red-haired girl, slapping the buttons on the console with more force than was strictly necessary, her jaw tight as she stared down the screen. Dustin, somewhat intimidated, but also somewhat infatuated, had grabbed Lucas to help him chat her up - and as they say in the love stories, the rest was history.

Or rather, Dustin was history, as Lucas and Max instantly hit it off. Dustin was pretty sure Max had taken a shine to Lucas over him because he had introduced himself to her, and then promptly flipped his shit when she mentioned that her name was Max, and that she went to Wellesley but came into Boston to take a class at MIT once a week.

"Wait hold on - MAX? MAX?!" Dustin grabbed the hair on either side of his face and pulled it, eyes bugging, and then punched Lucas in the arm. "Lucas, Lucas, did we seriously just find this girl without even looking for her, I guess we can abandon the 6-step plan I had for searching tattoo parlors in New York, Steve is going to FLIP OUT!"

Dustin was practically levitating with joy as he turned to her and grabbed her shoulders. "Max - do you have a stepbrother named Billy with very blue eyes, curly blonde hair, and a penchant for extremely tight jeans?"

"Ummmmm....what?" Max had looked way more than a little freaked out, and her body had tensed up, ready to get the hell out of the bar and away from two apparent stalkers, but then her expression shifted,

and she opened her eyes wide and said “Wait, did you just stay Steve??”

Turns out, Billy had waxed poetic to her all weekend on their camping trip about a certain doe-eyed guy he had met on the train, how he had itched to run his fingers through his soft, brown hair the entire time they talked, how he had opened up to him in a way that surprised him, how he glanced away with an almost imperceptible smile when he was embarrassed – all of these more details than Max cared to know. Billy, she said, was totally infatuated, and had been brooding about it for days now that Steve had failed to call. “Ugh, god, he’s driving me nuts, Steve this, Steve that, ‘Max he must have thought I was so fucking weird for telling him all this shit and like, taking my shoe off on the train, what the hell was I thinking.’”

After that revelation, the beginnings of what Dustin was calling the Grand Reunification had begun in earnest. Will was on board from the get go, a hopeless romantic as always. Lucas was happy for any excuse to see Max. Mike had argued that Dustin should just text Steve Billy’s number and be done with it, but he was brought on board by El, who watched way too many daytime soap operas and was a sucker for a good romantic caper. They decided that the perfect time to enact the plan was their annual post-graduation trip down to New York, and Max had already confirmed a trip to visit Billy at the same time. Now, they just needed to plan the details.

Dustin walked up to the table where his friends all sat, and flipped open his notebook where he had outlined the beginnings of a plan. They spent the rest of the night coming up with what Dustin believed to be a nearly flawless scheme, and everyone was excited, Max most of all. Dustin’s heart still squeezed a little bit when he looked at her, but he mostly knew that ship had sailed as she smiled softly at Lucas. No matter – he was doing this for Steve, personal heartbreak be damned. They were going to make this happen.

They parted that night to Dustin’s final words. “My lords, my ladies, the game is afoot. See you all next week to get on the train, and get this party started.”

.....

“Son of a bitch! Mike!” Dustin shouted, pounding on the door of Steve’s bathroom. Morning light streamed in through Steve’s living room windows as Lucas and Will were passed out on the air mattress, El was curled up on the big couch, and Mike was taking his sweet time in the shower.

It was a week after their beer garden planning session, and they had arrived in New York the night before with a good deal of fanfare, Nancy and Jonathan greeting them in Steve’s living room with big hugs, Steve busy in the kitchen laying out pizzas and snacks. It had been a late night, with lots of catching up, and Nancy and Jonathan had only forced them to bed at 2AM, heading back to the efficient studio downtown that they shared.

“Mike!” Dustin hissed, cracking the door open and glancing around to make sure Steve was still in his room with the door closed, “We have a timeline! If we need to be at the designated location by 3, then lunch needs-”

“Yeah, yeah!” Mike shouted, pushing the door open, still dripping - “I got it, hold your damn horses.”

Steve loved having the kids visit, but he did sometimes regret living in an apartment so much larger than Nancy and Jonathan’s - partly because of the occasional guilt that he lived alone in such a big place, and also, because the when the party came into town, they all crashed at his place - leading to a series of mornings surrounded by very irritable barely-twenty somethings who couldn’t keep to a shower schedule to save their lives.

By the time everyone had showered and shipped out for the morning, it was nearly noon. Steve was about to pull his hair out as they thundered down the steps in his building, alternately punching and laughing at each other, but he stopped himself, took a breath, and reminded himself of everything he loved about these kids, even in moments like this. They headed out the door into the warm May sunshine, and headed downtown to lunch, cutting through the park

on their way. Steve checked his watch with relief - they should be just fine to make their noon reservation, and this was a meal they absolutely did not want to miss.

Last week, when the party had met up to plan, Max had been the one with the idea of where they should meet. “Guys, it’s perfect. Billy’s so obsessed with the Strand, the big bookstore in Union Square, he can spend hours in there looking around for books. The one time I visited him down in New York we spent the whole afternoon just wandering around filling a tote bag, and he literally sat on the floor for an hour looking at the illustrations in this big old copy of ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ but then didn’t even buy it. And he makes fun of me for playing video games, ugh. It’s sort of endearing, though...anyway, I guarantee I can get him to sit in a dark corner with enough time to get Steve there as well.”

“Oh!” El cried with a soft gasp. “That’s perfect! Billy looking for a book in a romantic corner, Steve sees him from the end of the aisle, hesitating at first, he can’t believe his eyes, and then he-”

“UGH, EL, for the love of christ don’t give me the visual.” Dustin groaned. “I love Steve, but like a brother - the last thing I want is to picture romantic canoodling in the corner of a dimly lit bookshop...”

“You have to admit, though” Lucas chimed in “It sounds like a good plan, logically. If the target can be in one fixed location, it’ll be significantly easier to ensure a smooth delivery.”

“Yes!” Said Max, beaming.

“Also, Dustin, the location is perfect.” Mike said, as he zoomed in on the map on El’s phone, “Look - the bookstore is right down the street from our one required meal stop in New York City...”

“Wafflefest 2018 is about to begin, ladies and gentlemen!” Mike shouted as they approached the restaurant for lunch, hugging El close to him and giving her a big kiss on the cheek. The smell of chocolate

and freshly baked things wafted out onto the street from the imposing wooden edifice, and Steve had to admit he was pretty pumped for their annual all-out chocolate and baked-goods fest. A visit to Max Brenner to eat dessert-for-lunch was their annual end of school year tradition since the kids had first started coming to New York, ever since El had looked in the window one day when they passed by and realized that the menu had literally an entire page of dessert waffle options.

Nancy and Jonathan waved from a big table in the corner as they walked into the restaurant, and Steve slid into the seat next to Nancy, giving her a peck on the cheek. “Thank god, we all made it in one piece. Please tell me you’ve ordered drinks, and that you’re getting a bigger apartment before next year’s visit?”

Nancy laughed, smacked him with the menu, and said “Please, you’re fine. And I’ve already ordered us a pitcher of mimosas.”

“Nancy - and I mean this - I have never loved you more than in this moment.”

After two slices of dessert pizza, half a waffle, and more than a few mimosas, Steve was feeling slightly tipsy, very happy, and very full.

The kids, meanwhile, seemed decidedly less blissed out than Steve felt - having finished their huge portions of various desserts, they all either seemed to be texting somewhat furiously or whispering quietly to each other about something.

“Hey, guys?” Jonathan asked, attempting to get everyone’s attention. “Me and Nancy have to head out for a few hours for work, but we’ll see you later tonight for game night?”

A chorus of yeses and oks broke out across the table, and everyone exchanged hugs as Nancy and Jonathan headed out, running late for a photoshoot in the East Village. Game night was always the tradition after their afternoon of gorging on dessert - head back to Steve’s place, pass out for a few hours, then spend the night eating chips and cheetos and playing board games. But the party seemed to have a

different idea for this afternoon.

Dustin looked up at Steve with pleading eyes, and asked “Steve, I know we normally go back to your place, after, but there is apparently this massive used bookstore a few blocks from here, it’s really famous, we looked it up - we’ve got to go!”

Steve groaned, flopping over to the side in his chair. “Ugh...Dustin...I’m so full and sleepy...”

“Steve! They have got eighteen miles of books! You will not deprive me of this!” Dustin shouted. The rest of the party quickly backed him up, and soon Steve was overwhelmed with a chorus of pleas.

“Ok, Ok, give a guy a second to breathe! Let’s do this - I’m going up front to pay and then we can embark on a curiosity voyage of old, smelly, books!” Steve said playfully, winking at Dustin.

He probably did deserve the kick in the shin from Dustin that followed, but he would never have admitted it.

The walk to the bookstore was quick, only a few blocks, and mostly uneventful. Lucas had sprinted out the door a bit ahead of them, and had been on his phone the entire time they walked, glancing back at them every so often, and checking the time on his watch.

“What’s up with him?” Steve asked Will as they rounded the corner in front of the bookstore, Lucas hanging up the phone, then darting inside.

“Oh, not sure?” Will replied nonchalantly. “He’s got this new girlfriend back in Boston, probably just talking to her.”

“New girlfriend? Ok, ok, that makes more sense - I’ll have to bug him about her when we’re done here.” Steve said, laughing.

“Meet up front in an hour, ok guys?” Steve said to the group, pushing open the glass door to the bookstore.

Steve walked into the main room of the store and took it all in - he

had walked by the place dozens of times, but never gone inside, and he had to admit was pretty impressive. Tall bookshelves looming above from every direction, stacks of books on tables, staircases going down and up to floors of more books - he could see why the kids had been so insistent that they stop here to shop. It was great, but a little overwhelming, especially when tipsy from a number of mimosas. Steve lingered near the door uncomfortably as the kids streamed in behind him, unsure of where to walk first.

"Hey, Steve?" Will asked, tapping him softly on the shoulder - "Could you help me look for something? It's a big place, and I'm looking for a particular book, but I'm not sure which section it might be in."

"Sure, buddy!" Steve beamed back at him, glad to have been given a task to focus on in his attempt to navigate the store. "Divide and conquer, right? What are you looking for?"

"So I saw it on their website, and I thought it could be a really helpful reference for a painting I'm working on." Will said. "But, I'm not sure what section it's in. It's a big, illustrated copy of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', you know, the Shakespeare play? But I'm not sure if it would be in the Drama section, or in English Literature, or maybe even downstairs? They have a big area down there where they keep larger, illustrated books with art in them, I think. Could you maybe check down there for me while I look up here?"

"Sure, buddy!" Steve said. "I'll text you to come down if I find it." Will smiled at Steve, and then scampered off toward the Drama section on the other side of the store.

Steve walked into the center of the massive room full of bustling shoppers, and headed towards the small wooden staircase on his right. He could instantly feel a calmer, quieter energy as he walked down the stairs, away from the crowds above. There were far less shoppers down here - a few older ladies curled up in armchairs in the corner, two professor-looking types quietly discussing the merits of a particular title, and row after row of stately looking used books, many with bound, leather covers.

Steve could see out of the corner of his eye a sign that said 'OVERSIZED - ILLUSTRATED BOOKS' and he walked towards it,

hoping he was headed in the right direction. He strolled down to the far end of the basement, brushing his hands along the spines of books as he passed, soft leather and canvas under his fingertips. He glanced up again to check the sign, and then turned the corner into the designated aisle.

The aisle was long, not terribly well lit, and seemed to be empty - except for a man down near the end, who was seated on the floor, head bent down over a large book open in his hands - large, familiar looking hands that delicately turned the pages.

Steve's heart stopped right in his chest when he saw those hands, and he sucked in a long breath. There was no way in hell it could be Billy, no way Steve could have just randomly found him, no way this was not just another one of his 'almost' sightings as he walked the streets home from work, his heart leaping in his chest only to be found wanting...

But he had to be sure, just like all of the other times. Steve steeled himself, and walked down the aisle, heart thrumming in his chest as he approached the man, whose curly blonde hair, escaping from its tie, framed his downturned face.

Steve stopped halfway down the aisle, only a few feet away, unable to get any closer. He swallowed, and his voice cracked just a little as he tentatively asked "Billy?"

The man's head shot up, and Steve was looking into Billy's eyes, as fucking big and blue as he remembered. Billy looked confused, and then his face suddenly shifted into a sort of scared understanding as he focused in on Steve's face.

"Am I dreaming, or is that you, Steve?" he said, softly, tentatively.

"Yeah, it's me." Steve breathed out, taking a few long strides forward and dropping to his knees in front of Billy before the words started spilling out of him.

"I lost the book. The book, the book that you put your number in, on the train? I got distracted by a phone call before I could even look at your number and then I almost missed my stop and I basically leaped

off the train as it sped away but I left it, I left the book there, and Amtrak lost and found is a joke, and I've been to over twenty tattoo parlors in the city looking for you." Steve was rambling, his hands twisting in the air on either side of his face, but Billy was smiling, and his smile was so wide and warm that Steve thought he might burst open. Billy gently took Steve's hands from where they were gesticulating wildly, and pulled them down to rest on the open book in front of him, twining his fingers with Steve's.

Billy was still for a moment, and Steve could see the gears turning behind his eyes. "You lost the book." Billy said, less of a question and more of an astonished statement. "You lost the book, you never even got the chance to see my number. Fuckin' hell, Steve." Billy breathed this out and looked down, shoulders hunching over, but then he took in a deep breath, and looked back up at Steve.

"I figured you changed your mind and decided you didn't want to call, that I was more than you wanted to handle. I've been a mess for the past month over you, dammit, I've been dissecting every fucking thing I said to you on that train wondering where I went wrong -- but you just lost my number. Fuck!" Billy was laughing now, pulling his hands off of Steve's and slamming them on the floor with a smack as he grinned. He moved the oversized book off his lap and placed it on the floor, and got up on his knees to face Steve, who was fixed to the floor, too overwhelmed to move.

Steve silently held his breath as Billy leaned in towards him and gently cupped his face, the pads of his fingers gently stroking along Steve's jaw. Billy's eyes were winking, mischievous, as he edged into Steve's space. "You wanted to find me so badly after knowing me for six hours that you were going to visit every tattoo shop in New York looking for me?"

Steve swallowed, and nodded his head, doing his best to smile back as his head was swimming. "I would have found you, eventually."

Billy beamed, eyes flashing. "Yeah, I guess you have a point - but wait, how the hell did you find me here? What are the chances, I mean just mathematically, the probability...you know what, screw it. I don't care. Can I please just kiss you now?"

Steve licked his lips, gave an almost imperceptible nod, and then Billy's lips met his. Steve slumped against him as they kissed, body flooding with relief, and Billy's other hand slid along Steve's side, grasping the hem of his jacket, holding the long line of Steve's body up against his. Steve finally, finally, ran his fingers through Billy's hair, tugging out the long-suffering hair tie and letting the curls spill down over his hands. Billy pulled away for a second and fixed Steve with his eyes, and the look on his face was like a punch to the gut, heat curling low in Steve's belly.

The large book lay forgotten on the floor, open to a page covered in delicate drawings of woodland fairies, flowers, and tall, gilded trees, words in black ink spiraling into the edges of the page.

Steve had no idea how long they were there kissing like idiots as they knelt on the floor, Billy eventually pushing him so they were pressed up against one of the bookshelves, one hand on Steve's wrist, the other fisted in the hair at the nape of his neck. Steve dragged his hand down Billy's arm, feeling the muscles pull and flex underneath his palm, and Billy's chest was firm, pressed up against his. Billy pulled softly on his bottom lip with his teeth, and Steve swallowed a soft gasp, which Billy answered with a low growl, deep in his throat. Steve realized he couldn't remember ever having felt a kiss thrum through every part of his body like this, his fingers and toes and every part of him buzzing and flush with warmth.

He also dimly realized that he had no idea where the hell all of the kids had gotten to, until he very suddenly did know, as a stack of books a row away toppled over with a bang, and Billy and Steve broke apart, both looking down towards the end of the aisle.

Six very guilty looking twenty-somethings peaked their heads around the corner, trying to remain unseen, but then realized that they had very much been seen, and started to frantically book it towards the other end of the store. Billy looked extremely bewildered, but Steve just burst out into laughter, took Billy's hand to pull them both onto their feet, and shouted out "Get back here, you shitheads!"

Steve tugged at Billy's hand, and started to pull him towards the end of the row. Billy looked very confused, but game, and only hesitated for a second.

"Hold on, Steve - the book." Billy leaned down and picked it up off the floor almost reverently, and moved towards the shelf to put it back in its place. As he flipped it over, Steve could see the title, pressed in gold leaf on hunter green leather - "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

The realization of how deftly he had been manipulated flooded Steve's veins. How the fuck had the kids pulled this off? He was going to kill them, he was truly going to murder them, but first he was going to hug them all so hard they burst. He grabbed the book from Billy's hands, and tucked it under his arm.

"Oh, this thing?" Steve said. "It's coming with us."

Billy looked at him, eyes wide like Steve had hung the moon, and let himself be pulled along, their fingers firmly intertwined.

.....

"Steve? Steve, babe, you gotta get up."

Steve groaned and stuck his hand out from under his nest of blankets in the middle of his bed, flipping Billy off. Billy laughed, and jumped into the bed, landing next to Steve with a bounce that sent him nearly toppling off the edge. Billy grabbed him by the waist, pulled him close, and licked a wet stripe up the side of his face while tickling him in the ribs.

"Ughhhhhh....stoooooop....." Steve groaned.

"Get up! We're gonna miss the train if you stay in your cocoon any longer." Billy flashed him a wicked smile, leaped off the bed, and went back to getting ready in the bathroom.

Steve begrudgingly extracted himself from under the covers, and flopped his head over to glance into the bathroom, where his shirtless boyfriend was 100% dancing like an idiot to Janelle Monae while brushing his teeth. If it wasn't so goddam early in the morning, it

would have been almost charming.

While Billy continued his getting ready dance, Steve started throwing things in his suitcase, pulling an assortment of items he was pretty sure he could fashion into a few appropriate graduation outfits.

Graduation - of the entire merry band of little shits, that is. Sometimes, it was hard for Steve to process that they were no longer the ankle-biting middle schoolers who had somewhat unwillingly adopted him, that they were now like, actual adults. It was overwhelming to think about, and Steve was worried about making it through this weekend without tearing up. Billy had talked him down a bit last night when he started rambling about Dustin, who was 'so tall now, his hair was all short and slicked down, he wore a suit, a suit the last time we saw him, Billy!'

Steve sighed, knew he was being a little too dramatic, really, and he glanced over at Billy, who was now messing with his hair in the mirror while lip-syncing and rolling his hips to the music. Billy could be a lot, but after a year Steve had no regrets. He finished packing his bag, thinking about the kids again as he remembered the day they had so cleverly reunited him and Billy.

They had all been an amusing mixture of both ecstatic and mortified when Steve, dragging Billy behind him, had caught up with them in the far corner of the book store basement. El wore a smile a mile wide, holding onto Mike's side and practically jumping up and down, Will was beaming, and Dustin was wearing a satisfied smirk. Steve felt more overwhelmed than he had been in years, in both a good and bad way, and he let go of Billy's hand, handed him the giant book, and then turned around and grabbed Dustin, pulling him into a hug.

"Buddy, I have no idea how the fuck you pulled this off, but I know it was you, and while later I'm pretty sure I'm gonna be a bit pissed off at you for keeping this from me for a month, most likely, if this checks out like any of your past shenanigans, but I'm so grateful in this moment that you get a pass." Steve squeezed him, and Dustin hugged him back, looking only a little bit guilty. Steve slapped him on the back, pulled away, and straightened up to look at the other kids, including a red-haired girl he had never seen before, who could only be one person.

"Hi, Max, I'm Steve. Nice to finally meet you. Now, will someone tell me how the hell you all found her?"

The kids filled him in on the whole story later that night, sprawled on the floor of Steve's apartment, game night somewhat derailed by the events of the day. Nancy and Jonathan, who had been filled in over the phone, brought over cupcakes and champagne, and they all spent the night in the living room swapping old stories and getting to know Billy and Max.

Billy sat at Steve's side, at first looking a little bit dazed, but reverting back to his usual charismatic self by the end of the evening. He had trailed Steve all night, keeping him close like he might lose him again, fingers pressed gently to Steve's thigh or running along the back of his arms. Steve could still remember how he could feel every light touch of Billy's hands through his whole body, even as they sat surrounded by the kids, and he hoped that the feeling would never go away. It had been a year now, Steve thought, and it was still there every time they touched.

Billy called out to Steve, snapping him out of his memories and back to the present day. "Babe! Come get ready with me, it's our song!"

Steve headed towards the bathroom, perked up his ears, and groaned. "Billy, by our song, do you mean your ridiculous sex song?"

Billy smiled and wagged his tongue as he grabbed Steve's hand and tugged him forward into his arms, pressing their hips together as he moved with the music. He laughed, and whispered into Steve's ear "Please, you love it. *They don't know how you like it...I'mma need the whole night and a little bit more...*" Billy sang softly to him, pulling him closer.

Steve had two thoughts as he let himself be pulled into a kiss - one, that this man would be the death of him, and two, that they were definitely going to be late for their train.

Somehow, through the combination of sheer luck in subway timing, and the inevitability of Amtrak delays, they made it onto the train

with a few moments to spare. It was not terribly crowded, but Steve smiled as Billy, per usual, walked through the cars until he found an open four-seater - the same type of seat where they had their first fateful meeting. Billy had, of course, never acknowledged that he was secretly a giant sap who did things like this on a regular basis, but Steve also would never question it, was happy that Billy treasured their first meeting so much that he wanted the reminder as often as possible.

They shoved their bags down and collapsed into the seats, grateful to have made it on. Steve, still sleepy and feeling a little overwhelmed, made Billy sit next to the window, and latched himself to Billy's side, burrowing in under his arm and pressing his nose up against the warm expanse of Billy's chest, smelling clean mint soap and the underlying scent of Billy, smoky and pungent like dark, sweet honey. On the rare occasions that Steve came home after a long day and Billy was already over at Steve's place, Steve would stand for a few minutes, before kissing him, before staying a word, and just press his face into the crook of Billy's neck and breathe him in, breathe in the smell of home.

"Are you still nervous about this weekend?" Billy asked, gently, rubbing his hand along Steve's back.

Steve shifted in his seat, and tried to think about the best way to put it all into words. "Not nervous? Nervous doesn't really feel right. If anything, I'm like the opposite? I am fully aware that the kids are all going to be 100% fine out there, way more than I was at their age. I was still depressed as hell in Hawkins at their age, basically."

"Honestly?" Steve cast his eyes up at Billy, who was looking down on him fondly, "I'm mostly just really overwhelmed because for a long time, I was sure the kids were going to graduate, go out there into the big world, and just sort of, blow away? That's a really weird way of saying it. I guess I just spent the first few years they were in college so freaked out about where my life was headed, that I thought once they got their acts together it would just make me feel even more inadequate, more left in the dust. Which then just made me feel guilty for thinking that. And I had started feeling better about everything before you came along, I was getting a lot more confident and figuring my stuff out, but..." he trailed off.

“But you needed me to ride in on my white horse and sweep you off your feet? You know how to flatter a guy, really.” Billy laughed, sarcastically. But then his expression shifted into something more serious, and he ran a finger under Steve’s chin, tipping it upward. He licked his lips and shifted a little in his seat so he was looking right into Steve’s eyes.

“I was doing ok by the time I met you, Billy.” Steve said, swallowing. “And I think you were doing ok, too, despite everything. But now...this past year...I’m finally at a place that’s more than ok, and you’ve been a really big part of that.”

He looked up at Billy and tilted his head slightly, brushing their noses together. “I don’t need to be paranoid about losing the kids, or letting go of them more, because...you’re my family now, too.”

Billy smiled softly, ducking his head just a bit, and stroked down the side of Steve’s face. Steve took a deep breath, and figured, what the heck. “I was going to wait to ask this until we got back to the city - I had dinner reservations next week and everything, but - will you move in with me? When your lease is up this summer?”

Billy squeezed his eyes shut, took a deep breath, and then looked up at Steve with a wicked smile. Steve could see instantly that while Billy was about to play this off like no big deal, he couldn’t hide that moment of vulnerability that betrayed how much it really meant.

“Reservations?” Billy laughed. “I don’t know if I can say yes to this now, not when clearly I was supposed to be wined and dined - did you get a little red velvet box for the key and everything?”

“Maybe...” Steve mumbled, shoving his face into the crook of Billy’s neck.

Billy looked ecstatic at this information, and laughed loudly. “God, how did I end up with such a romantic sap? It’s a good thing you’re pretty enough to get away with it. Also, I’m mostly sure this invite to move in is way more about me cooking dinner for you every night as opposed to just weekends...”

Steve laughed at this and snuggled deeper into Billy’s chest. ‘So that’s

a yes?" he asked.

Billy gave him a pointed stare. "Yes, dumbass, of course." and kissed his forehead. He then gently pushed Steve off of him to grab something in the big bag near his feet. He pulled out two tiny champagne bottles with a flourish, laughing when he saw the confused expression on Steve's face.

"I bought a bunch of these to bring up this weekend so we could toast each of the kids at their ceremonies - Also, I know you love miniature shit so I thought you would think they were cute. But this is a cause for celebration too, right? And I sincerely doubt we're ever getting those long-awaited Amtrak dining car mimosas, so we might as well..." Billy popped the tops off easily, and handed Steve one of the tiny bottles. "Cheers, to us?" he asked.

"Cheers!" Steve replied, taking a sip.

The champagne was a bit warm, and there was no orange juice in sight, but none of that much mattered in the face of Billy, warm in his arms as they kissed, bubbles still tingling on their tongues.

Author's Note:

I'm on tumblr as well [@myriophylous](#) Join me in freaking out about these two as well as general musings on fandom, english language, and arts/crafty stuffs.

For anyone curious, the song Billy's singing at the end is [Jidenna's 'A Little Bit More'](#) and I still don't understand how it was not THE JAM of summer 2016 cause it's great and I really see modern day Billy feeling that vibe.